

Comment from the Author, "Old tales of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Welsh, newly retold; for all interested readers."

# NEWES OF þe (knowne) WORLDE

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For Circa 1265

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Welsh Troops Circa 1265



## Cymric Troops – Allies & Foes – Their equipment.

To rationalise what the Welsh troops would have been like during this period one obviously can only sift through known accounts. Also there are the descriptions of their general fighting style and the outcomes, the victories and defeats that were the result. There are small snippets and fragments of accounts – which would nowadays be termed as hearsay – but these are still useful because they provide additional background (possibly exaggerated) concerning the use of weaponry such as bows. In truth the Welsh fighting man has often been overlooked because of the lack of main-stream popular history commentators. Medieval scriptorians concentrated on people deemed to be pious or famous and those who would more readily help pay the writer's bills. Thus there are books by the hundred about King Edward I and barely any about Welshmen. Never-the-less, what I have compiled is a quick set of descriptions which seem to form a continuous "average" if you like, of the equipment used fairly constantly, right up to and slightly after the subjugation of Gwallia by Edward I.

Typical equipment:-

Headgear was simple. Steel skull-caps with nasal bars and also rounded cervelliere type caps. Hardened leather helmets with brow band or spangenhelm type banded iron reinforcements. Iron helmets with iron or leather, cheek-plates and neck guards.

Light Iron helmets with full face protection. (Old-fashioned early-style helms, in effect.)

Padded leather hoods – most likely of Sheepskin –also giving shoulder protection.

For more heavily armoured men –non archers, captured Kettle-type helmets distinctly probable.

Modern full helms would only have been used by high Welsh nobility – Usually if on horseback.

Welsh males were under no obligation to commonly wear coifs as daily head coverings – it being a matter of personal choice, however it remains possible that they may have adopted the use of the arming-cap, the military padded version of the coif – to be worn when in combat as additional protection.

Body armour: They used mostly lightweight body armour. These are the commonest types.

Padded Aketons (vertically quilted and lightly stuffed) of linen or wool. (Often sleeveless or having detachable sleeves)

Padded Gambesons (vertically quilted and lightly stuffed) soft-leather faced types. (Occasionally these must have been like earlier short, waist length, Irish versions which are shown having a lozenge-shaped reinforcement plate attached to the outer face over each breast. (Plates made of Iron, latern-brass, bronze or horn.)

Light, long-armed, flexible soft-leather tunics. Knee length, split front or sides to aid movement.

Light, short-sleeved, flexible soft-leather corselets. Some having dagged edges to sleeves and lower edge.

Short sheepskin jackets, sleeveless (or having detachable sleeves). (More common than Aketons) Worn with the leather face outwards.

Short mail shirts without sleeves, and short mail shirts with short sleeves were also –but far more rarely – used by Welsh foot soldiers.

Leather Cuiries. (Worn to be visible, unlike on English knights.) Can be worn over other layers.

An extended note on the latter item: This was another form of corselet which was a short leather (waist-length) body armour construction having reinforced zones to breast and sometimes shoulder. Front and rear portions being joined fully down one side and shoulder and closed by straps and small buckles (or ties) upon the opposite neck/shoulder and side.

(These items were often reinforced using multi-layering of leather patches, interwoven leather strips of raw-hide or boiled leather platelets – sometimes they were made to form a short version of what we now call “scale-armor”. This form of defence was often regarded as being old-fashioned and barbaric by the Normans and latterly the English of our period. Be that as it may, the multiple layers could slow down and stop the penetration of an arrow –if you were lucky. Hence its continued use by the Welsh.)

Leg and arm and defences:

Well-equipped Cymric soldiers had been noted during earlier periods as being unusual in that they continued in the use of metal leg defences. Gerald of Wales again specifically alludes to these items – translated, he calls them “iron greaves”. The 13<sup>th</sup> Century form of which (in use from the 1250’s) would have been the simple gutter shaped version backed with leather. N.B. The metal portion covered the front face of the lower leg only, as distinct from ancient or later varieties which follow the leg form far more closely and enclose it.

Use of sheepskin / leather for bracers to the lower arms a distinct common probability. Bracers being commonly needed and used by Welsh archers. They would be of a type with leather faces outward and thin enough so as not to interfere with the actions of using a bow. Likewise discreet lightweight lower leg defences of similar type would have been in usage.

(Notes on the latter items. This type of thing has been in use by fighting men of practically all eras – right up to, and including the present day as an aid in the rush through scrubby undergrowth and brambles. Sheepskins tanned or otherwise would have been widely available to all classes of Cymric society in a way that was impossible for the average Englishman. The Welsh ate mutton or lamb meat regularly; the English lower classes did not. Although not specifically listed in any period documentation – most perishable, discarded items seldom were – the Welsh were often accused of being barbaric in appearance as well as in fighting habits. One of the commonest things shunned as being unacceptable by those termed “civilized” throughout the whole of Europe and England was the base usage of skins and furs, without them having been properly tailored for use as inner-linings to cloaks or garments where it was normally invisible in use. (Upper class Ermine robes, etc, where the fur’s rarity was on display, being exceptions.) Using sheepskins as they were, and not turning them into woollen cloth and parchments was considered unthinkable! Although sheepskins are unpopular with modern re-enactors generally, as they try to avoid that certain “cave-man” look so popular with Hollywood, it also seems that the Welsh fighting-man really didn’t care what English Lords thought about them.

N.B.I can find no mention of hardened – shiny, wax boiled leather armours of any kind in reference to the Welsh. As wax boiling appreciably increases the weight of the leather – almost to being the equal of thin iron, it seems sane for us to assume that it was unsuitable to their fighting style and simply was not used. To back this up, a surfeit of wax in the Welsh economy is not listed in the period in question and therefore it is a 99% certainty that no “Roman or Greek- style” corselet armours, leg greaves or arm bracers should be used. To avoid glaring anachronisms as usual, no modern studded leathers, jackets, boots or studded wrist-guards can be allowed.

The exception to the rule concerning lightly armoured Welsh fighting men, will of course always be the Welsh Lords themselves. If they were on horseback they would probably be almost as well-equipped as any English knight. However, their Marcher opponents had a tendency to lighten their armour, in an attempt to be able to catch up with fleeing raiders. They copied the Welsh.

Clothing generally:

Long sleeved linen shirt. Rounded neck-opening with slight frontal "v" slit. Commonly worn.

Long sleeved woollen tunic. Generously proportioned, about knee-length. Neck opening as noted above. Commonly worn.

Long simple surcoats of woollen cloth. Having a rounded neckline with a slight frontal "V" slit and with either front & rear, or side slits were worn as day-clothes over tunics without armour. They are clearly shown in plain single colours or two coloured divided down the vertical centreline. E.g. Red and white. Green and white. Green and cream. These surcoats are also shown pulled up and rolled-over what seem to be ornately decorated belts. In effect, they hitched them up in order to shorten the length, when they needed to. This seems to have been both a Welsh and a Marcher fashion statement of the 1260's. It was certainly not commonly done throughout the rest of England.

Braies: Linen, woollen, or even leather. Knee-length. Less baggy in appearance than English costume version. Tighter fit to the legs – a scaled down variety, one that used less cloth.

Commonly worn in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century for prudence sake – not because they had to.

Hose: Separate leg type, of woollen cloth. Not always used by the Welsh. An expensive item that rapidly became tattered moving through undergrowth unless lower leg protection was used.

More widely used by the upper classes as a mark of wealth but may be used by all.

Ankle hose: Hose without feet extension coverings. Woollen cloth. Worn by unshod men.

Cloaks: Come in all sizes. Medium, short and full length, according to status of wearer. These were commonly worn every day. When in combat or moving through woodland they may well have been tightly rolled in a tube-like fashion and wrapped around the body to provide extra protection against arrows and blows. Square, rectangular, semi-circular and elliptical pattern versions widely used. Poor versions were almost of no use, being very thin. All types made of woollen cloth. Expensive versions were almost felted and very weatherproof. For the very wealthy day-cloaks were lined with additional furs such as rabbit, squirrel etc.

Short cloaks, shoulder capes: Made of Sheepskin, goatskin were used as lightweight shoulder armour.

Gloves: The Welsh fighting man of the period rarely wore hand protection. I submit that any form of hand protection of period type be allowed. Leather gloves, mittens, armoured gloves or properly disguised modern gloves included. But overtly later style metal gauntlets of 14<sup>th</sup> & 15<sup>th</sup> C etc, should not be used.

Shoes: The Welsh had some odd fighting habits according to some commentators – one was fighting barefoot. Not recommended! Shoes were used by them, and when used, were of the sort now termed as "bog-trotters". They were of fairly soft although hardwearing leather. A sort of cross between a Roman calliga sandal and a moccasin. Compared to standard English period footwear they would have looked pretty crude as they were pulled into shape by the thongs that tied them up. Any period footwear, shoe or ankle-boot would be acceptable for safety reasons.

Boots: The Welsh often wore boots of soft leather that reached to below the knee. They were a good fit and tied up so that they allowed hard running. No heels, flat soles. Matt finish such as sheepskin. Not brightly coloured, super-shiny or modern. High thigh boots such as 15<sup>th</sup> C versions were still unknown.

Shields: For the majority of Cymric fighters shields were round with a central iron boss. (Rounded not pointed or spiked) Normally convex in construction but flat ones must have also been in use. However they should not be overtly large. Medium sized according to each man. They were

not used in "shield wall" tactics very much – which for them was only as a last resort, they fought in a much more open order style which (in the period being discussed) allowed them initially to use bows and to throw missiles– plus, they had to be able to run for miles with the things, up and down very steep Welsh hillsides!

Some Welsh adopted the use of standard "heater" shaped shields. Indeed there is one Welsh illustration which backs this up. Also the Henry III roll lists the heraldry of numerous wealthy Welsh landowners. Shield designs where used, should be period in style. As most fighting was done from a point of view of an ambush, the average man would not like to give the game away! Preferences shown on illustrations for clothing colours were for greens, muted yellows, oranges, rust colours, some reds and whites. Shield colours were likely to be similar.

Accordingly, only as a suggestion, it seems likely that muted colours may have been used mostly. They used shield quartering and geometrical halves quite commonly. Images of animals and decorations were simple, not over-complicated as in earlier Dark-Age periods.

Heraldry of upper-class Welsh knights were as colourful as their English neighbours.

Weapons: Fighting on home ground, defensively or from prepared positions it seems as if they used quite long spears to hold the enemy advance at bay and archery to harass them.

Fighting away from home – on the move; they preferred lighter spears, javelins, and throwing darts. In earlier times it had been noted a few of them had gained a liking for using light axes.

Swords were of the general period types, but two-handed or great-swords were extremely rarely used. They were deemed to be too cumbersome and slow to be any good. The Welsh preferred slightly lighter blades. Fighting mostly against rival Welsh bands they were not aiming to cut their way through heavy mail.

The Welsh had numerous fighters who were excellent archers. They used bows made from locally grown wood. Not all of them were full-sized longbows. When grouped together or shooting from behind cover these archers were very much a fearful prospect to encounter.

Alas, for various reasons, the Cymric foot-soldier put himself at a disadvantage when he was cornered into a pitched-battle on open flat ground – as at Evesham.

Translations taken from the writings of Gerald of Wales yield these useful commentaries:-

"The Welsh people are light and agile. Fierce rather than strong and totally dedicated to the practice of arms.

On many occasions they have not hesitated to fight without any protection at all – against men clad in iron." (I.e. Mail.)

"They do not shine in open combat and in fixed formations, but harass their enemy using ambushes and night attacks."

"They rush forward rapidly attacking very fiercely, but they are as quick to retire. If pursued they will turn about suddenly to send forth a hail of arrows and javelins upon the foe."

"They use light weapons which do not impede their quick movements.

Small leather corselets, handfuls of throwing darts, javelins, round shields, and also long spears."

"They wear helmets and sometimes iron greaves."

"Most of the common folk prefer to fight on foot, going either barefooted or else wearing boots made from untanned..." (Soft?) "...leather. These are only roughly sown together."

"During the day..." (...also in bed – they rarely undress) "...the poorer men often wear only a tunic and a cloak."

The Welsh it seems (luckily for my researches so far) seemed to have been remarkably consistent in regards to their fighting preferences. One could say that they were very, very traditional.

## Cymric Troops – Allies & Foes – Their background.

Historically there are very few totally accurate descriptions of the Welsh fighting man of the thirteenth century. Reports range from scurrilous comments and sayings – by people who were not Welsh; to glowing accounts of their bravery and mettlesome-ness. (By people who were Welsh, but did not live during the exact period in question.)

However, putting all such bias aside it has to be true that Cymric warriors of all classes did succeed in holding onto most of their base territories for many years after the invasion of Britain by the Normans.

Accepting this generalisation means that they fought well in situations and countryside, which suited them and their particular tactical way of defending themselves and waging war.

For generations the Welsh conducted, and also repulsed, war-like incursions over the disputed borderland that lay in what were usually termed at the time as “the Marches”.

Historians have had an unfortunate tendency to berate the abilities of Cymric troops, but this is unjustified. They fought many pitched battles within their own lands which they won handsomely. The main reasons, so it would seem, why these fighting men were treated with disdain in the past; stems from their apparent lack of glamour – indeed their very dearth of the standard norms in terms of military equipment – regarded as being necessary to wage war in an “accepted” manner. Looking at it from the other direction, it merely seems to be the remnants of a “sour-grapes” attitude. Few wealthy land-owning Knights and barons wished to be reminded that they had been fought to a stalemate by a band of people who they regarded mostly as being peasants – and ungovernable peasants at that!

They fought using the intimate knowledge of their local lands. They could “self-organise” themselves at very little notice, to form up into a coherent series of family or settlement based fighting units. They held a reputation of being “ever-ready” for war. They trained constantly. So-much-so, they were looked upon as being incapable of carrying on with suitable standards of commerce or agricultural work which were deemed vital for the basis of a so-called civilised society. In short, the Welsh were not tamed like the majority of the English population. They were different. They held allegiance to families who had held sway in their localities for generations. Who you were, and who you were related to, bonded the fabric of each area together. Unfortunately, it is also true to say that things could be stirred up by petty squabbles and perceived injustices in a way which could then be remembered for generations. It was the machinations of various princes and local lords generally, which had kept the numerous regions of Wales (as we now understand it) in turmoil.

During the 1260's Llewellyn the main Prince in the North was trying to achieve recognition as the feudal overlord of many areas which had never belonged to him. In 1265 he saw his chance to gain this recognition from King Henry III's brother-in-law, the Earl of Leicester, Simon de Monteforte. Simon was nearing the pinnacle of his power. Simon held Henry in a state of limbo and looked as though he could take away his throne at any moment. To Llewellyn's way of thinking, signing a treaty and loaning Simon some 5000 troops to clear away the remains of Royalist opposition would smooth the path to being granted the title Prince of Wales – and to lasting independence. (The men “on loan” belonged to other subordinate lordlings. If they were to meet with disaster who is to know if Llewellyn really cared. It would strengthen his power at home.)

Soon, troops such as these were marched away to meet their fate at the battle of Evesham.

Comments from the Author, "My intention is to inform the general reader, who may be unfamiliar with the Complexities of 13<sup>th</sup> C history. It is not to justify, berate, glorify or defame the actions of any of our ancestors. (Noble or otherwise.) In such a spirit, no offence is intended in any wise, to people, places, faiths or Countries. Period comments are translations from those perceived to have been uttered, voiced or written at the time.

# NEWES OF þe (knowne) WORLDE

**Issue Number XIII. Addendum For Circa 1265 Dateline November 26<sup>th</sup> 2021.**

Bibliography: General data from items listed below.

Giraldus Cambrensis 1145/46 – 1223 is the author most trusted for delivering us pretty typical descriptions of Welsh warriors and their fighting style. In his works The Description of Wales, books I chapter 8 and book II chapters 2, 3, 8 and 10 he makes numerous statements and assumptions which seem to tally well with historical reality, still true in the 1260's.

For illustrations of Welsh tunics and day-clothes, there is Darluniau o lyfr cyfraith Hywel Dda. By Daniel Huws.

The original manuscript is Peniarth 28, known mainly as a version of the Law book of Hywel the good. This particular version is dated variously by historians on the grounds of script and grammar, to be from the 1250's to the 1280's. The manuscript itself was drawn and written by a Welshman. Giving us a rare version of illustrations done by a native of the country. ISBN 0-907158-28-5 (Published 1988) Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru.

There are small margin drawings of Cymric fighting men and archers, (literally scattered through the footnotes of history) to be found in parchments from the 1240's to the 1300's. These merely confirm the general descriptions already given by Gerald of Wales. They do however show that the hairstyles had changed slightly. So Cymric hairstyles can be anything from very short – almost cropped and showing the ears, to medium long and even swept-back. Very modern looking in fact.

For background history leading up to the Battle of Evesham both extensive and general you may try:

**The Baron's War (including the battles of Lewes and Evesham)**

By William Henry Blaauw, esq, M.A. This work undertaken and written before 1844.

2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Published 1871 by Bell & Daldy, York St. Covent Garden. London.

It is of Victorian to modern readability (I have no idea if this is still in print anywhere.)

His extensive research, (though superseded by modern tastes,) produces prodigious points of interest well worth following up. He took the trouble to sift through and translate many manuscript documents which are nearly impossible to get hold of even now.

His excellent book has a mammoth list of full references, and footnotes to spare.

For modern reading and excellent information that gives a general overall view of the historical setting / campaign leading up to the battle of Evesham, try:-

Lewis and Evesham 1264-1265 (Simon de Montfort and the Baron's War.)

By Richard Brooks. ISBN 978 1 4728 1150 9 Osprey Publishing Ltd. Published 2015.

Written & illustrated by A.Westmancoat member of Circa 1265.